

**Shutford Village Hall**  
**Note of a Public Meeting on 4 February 2016**  
**to discuss the future of the Village Hall**

*This note has been prepared by the Independent Chairman of the meeting, Michael Roberts (MR) from notes taken during the meeting by himself and two assistants. There is a Summary by the Chairman at the end of this note which sets out his personal conclusions.*

1. MR opened a very well attended meeting at 7.30 by introducing himself. The Village Hall Committee (VHC) had called the meeting recognising that views on its proposals for the future of the village hall had divided opinion and believing that it would be helpful for a neutral individual to chair it. MR lives in Balscote, is Chairman of the Wroxton and Balscote Parish Council, has no direct or indirect connections with Shutford and has no view either for or against the principle of replacing Shutford's existing village hall. (SVH)
  
2. He went on to emphasise that this meeting would not lead to any decisions being taken and was intended simply to set out the objective arguments for and against replacement of SVH, so as to enable the community to arrive at a properly informed view as to the best course of action. He proposed to take a show of hands at the start and end of the meeting, as he thought it would be helpful to establish whether the opinion of those attending had altered as a result of the points raised. He had arranged for two speakers (Bart Patrick and Andrew Parsons) to open the proceedings by setting out the basic cases for and against the VHC proposals, neither speaker being a member of either the VHC or of the Parish Council. MR would then open the meeting to comments and questions from the floor. He did not intend to place any time limit on the meeting, but hoped that people would stay to the end to hear the arguments. In the event only two people left the meeting before the end.

***Briefly stated, the VHC propose building a new structure on the existing site, financed by a loan; the proposed loan would be provided by the Public Works Loan Board (PWLB), have a low rate of interest fixed for its potential 25 year life, but would be repayable early if so desired; the loan would need to be taken out***

***by Shutford Parish Council, resulting in a need to increase the precept (levied as part of the Council Tax charge on households).***

3. On an initial request for a show of hands for and against the proposal the result was

**31 in favour, 23 against and 1 undecided.**

Shortly afterwards a member of the audience indicated that he had been confused by the question posed. He had supported the idea of rebuilding SVH, but not on the existing site. MR apologised for any confusion caused, confirmed that his intention had been to gauge support for rebuilding on the **existing** site and asked for a fresh show of hands in support of this. This resulted in 34 votes in favour (previously 31) but MR noted that two people had joined the meeting since the first vote had been taken. He concluded that the sense of the meeting was generally fairly clear on the point.

4. Bart Patrick set out the arguments which had led him, as a member of the community who had not personally made significant use of SVH, to support the VHC proposals. In summary,
  - a) He emphasised that he respected the views of all villagers who disagreed with him, but that he had personally concluded that the proposal to rebuild on the existing site was the most sensible option.
  - b) The vote on the village survey was fair and representative, carried out independently and paid for by the Parish Council. Having a turnout of below 100% is normal ; even in national elections, only votes actually cast are reflected in the result.
  - c) Using the church as an alternative space would not be viable or realistic, not least due to the absence of disabled access, the existing site is the only one known to be available; there will always be suggestions of alternatives, but he had concluded that it was more realistic to focus on what is actually available.
  - d) Rebuilding on the current site would cost the community of the order of £150,000 taking the pledges received into account; in any other

location it would be logical to expect the cost to the community to be perhaps twice that amount.

- e) Heavy costs would be inevitable if the existing hall were to be decommissioned and not replaced; this would be additional to the cost of building elsewhere. The existing hall has a very limited life expectation due to severe problems with its structure and site (notably an unstable bank behind it).
- f) The existing site has easy links to the pub and the church, which would be lost in a move to a different location
- g) The terms of PWLB loans are highly competitive and offer certainty as to interest costs.

He concluded by urging the community to unite behind the proposition that the village has a real ongoing need for a village hall at its heart and to get on with implementing the proposals put forward by the VHC. To take no action would inevitably result in the permanent loss of the village hall.

5. Andrew Parsons then set out the opposing case.

- a) He suggested that the referendum result could not be interpreted as a clear majority in favour of the proposal and said that an increase in the precept would apply to all households; consequently those who did not vote at all, or who did not support the proposal, would nevertheless be forced to bear the costs of an increased precept.
- b) He described the proposed building as a costly vanity project, citing the example of the Balscote hall which he suggested had cost only one third of what was proposed for Shutford (*MR intervened to say that the actual cost in the Balscote case had been not dissimilar to the Shutford proposals, especially bearing in mind the groundwork costs and the fact that 7 years had intervened since that contract was signed*).
- c) He questioned whether the projections of hall usage were realistic (do people still use halls for parties?) and he expressed concern about the future risk of accidents due to the nature of the proposed

road access.

- d) He suggested that the precept is very likely to have to be increased in any event, due to the government's austerity measures. The increase proposed by the VHC would come on top of any such increase.
- e) He questioned the lack of new fund raising efforts by the VHC for the village hall. (*several speakers intervened at this point to challenge his statement and pointed to a list of over 30 charitable trusts, including the National Lottery, that had been contacted without any success, before the use of a PWLB loan had been suggested*)
- f) He was critical of a perceived lack of transparency by the VHC, the fact that only a small number of people had been involved in developing the proposals and the use by the VHC of incomplete and partial mailing lists. He claimed that these had come not only from sources not clearly identified with the VHC, but these had also resulted in known opponents of the VHC being excluded from mailing shots.
- g) He believed that the VHC had been fixated on using the existing site simply because of its charitable status. For example, they had failed to consider alternatives for a new hall such as the area of the bus shelter, perhaps approaching the Broughton estate for a plot (given that they had donated the existing site), or even using the church as a community space.
- h) He questioned the village hall's governance structure and in particular the lack of separation of function between the Trustees and the VHC. As a result, he suggested that the Trustees had been coerced by a group of committee members that now proposed a scheme which would, if adopted, force every household to spend an average of £750 spread over the next 25 years on a hall which the majority had not voted for and would probably never use and which would not, in his view, represent value for money.

He acknowledged that he was not opposed to the basic principle of retaining a hall, albeit not in the existing location, but concluded his comments by urging sustained opposition to the particular scheme proposed by the VHC.

6. MR then opened the meeting to comments from the floor.

- An early speaker expressed support for replacing SVH and emphasised the importance of this for future owners of houses in Shutford and children yet to be born.

A second speaker pointed out that the current focus on an increase in the precept overlooked the fact that, as properties in the village went on the market, prospective buyers would be highly unlikely to be put off by a slightly higher overall Council Tax bill than currently applies. He noted that the precept should be seen in the context of a much larger overall Council Tax bill, of which the precept forms only a small part. The impact in terms of most households' annual outgoings would be small.

It became clear quite quickly from a number of contributions from the floor that, in line with Andrew Parson's position, there is in fact little outright opposition in the village to the basic principle of **having** a village hall – it is simply that there is as yet no consensus as to **location** or how a new building should be **funded**. One speaker asked why the VHC had excluded the alternative of simply refurbishing the existing building. This question clearly commanded a good deal of support within the meeting and this prompted a substantial contribution from the next speaker (Gordon Freeman) in direct response to that question.

- Gordon Freeman said that he wished to respond both to the points made by Andrew Parsons and to the question as to why refurbishment was not being considered.

His key message was that the VHC do not have time on their side in addressing problems with the existing hall. An

independent Condition Survey has identified serious problems with the roof fixings, cracks in the foundations, land slippage in the bank behind the hall, and lack of disabled access.

The latter issue could be staved off as long as a plan existed to remedy it (in other words by rebuilding the hall), but the hall would be immediately in breach of the law if the current replacement plan were to be abandoned. He pointed out that the existing site would require work to stabilise it even if a rebuild was to happen elsewhere. It is the VHC's opinion that refurbishment of the existing hall would be an uneconomic proposition, given the problems with the fabric of the building already mentioned. It would cost between £125,000 and £175,000 to achieve, whilst he pointed out that the £100,000 received in pledges were intended to help in funding a new hall and would not be available in the case of a refurbishment.

In practice, **no** alternative site is currently available and the VHC had established to its satisfaction that building elsewhere would cost considerably more than the current proposal, because the pledges of £100,000 just referred to were stated to be conditional on the **current** site being used (*Note: in answer to a question, GF acknowledged that the VHC had accepted this condition as a given and he said that enquiry would be made as to whether the benefactors might offer some flexibility on the point*)

However, he repeated that the extra cost of building elsewhere (need to provide access, services etc., to say nothing of losing the benefit of the existing fixed price tenders for rebuilding on the existing site) made an alternative location for the hall highly problematic., even if the existing pledges turned out to be transferable and even if an alternative site could be secured.

In addition, moving to an alternative site would not alter the realities of the funding problem. The village would need to raise £300,000 or more for a new hall on a new site, instead of £150,000 for the proposal advocated by the VHC.

It is the VHC's carefully considered view that the only realistic answer to funding the project is a PWLB loan; the alternative of fund raising would push the build phase too far into the future (at inevitably escalating cost) to be in any way a realistic option.

He confirmed the point made earlier that many people in the village had made concerted efforts to obtain funding support from charitable trusts and grant giving bodies, including the National Lottery. However, the result had been that only small amounts had been raised (no doubt due to the tough economic climate) and that was nowhere near enough to plug the £150,000 gap in the current rebuilding plan. He confirmed that there was no reason why any future fund raising could not be used to repay the proposed PWLB loan early, whether entirely or just partially.

Finally, he acknowledged Andrew Parsons' comment that all the efforts to get a rebuilding project underway were being led by the same small group of committed individuals. He pointed out that the very last thing the VHC wanted was to exclude others from their deliberations. The fact was that, in common with the experience of many villages, there had never been any interest from the wider village community in getting involved with, or taking an interest in, village hall affairs. He assured the meeting that the VHC would in fact warmly welcome new blood.

He concluded by pointing to the real personal risk to which the VHC and Trustees would be exposed if no action is taken and the strong likelihood that the existing hall will in practice be forced to close very soon because of its parlous physical condition.

- Gordon Freeman was followed by a number of speakers who debated the imponderable but entirely legitimate question as to whether a new hall would generate better usage, but the sense of the meeting remained as previously, namely that it

would be detrimental for the village to lose its hall.

- Ken Jeffs (one of the church wardens) made it clear that use of the church as an alternative community space would be highly impracticable due to the complexity of gaining consent from a large number of agencies, the conditions which would inevitably be imposed and the resulting prohibitive costs. He cited the example of Swalcliffe where installation of disabled access had been costed at well over £100,000 due to such factors.
5. There being no other comments from the floor, MR called for a second show of hands in the light of the discussion that had taken place.

On this occasion the result was

**35 in favour, 18 against and, perhaps surprisingly, 5 now undecided.**

Thus there had been a small but noticeable shift in favour of the VHC proposals. It was noted from the floor that the two people who had already left the meeting had in fact voted in favour of the proposal on the first show of hands.

6. There being no other business, MR thanked villagers for attending the meeting and seeing it through to the end. He undertook to prepare a note of the meeting over the weekend and hoped to circulate it within a matter of days.

He declared the meeting closed at 9.30

### ***Chairman's Summary and Comment***

*The following comments represent my personal conclusions as to the merits of the arguments put forward and, as someone coming cold to the issues raised, I thought that an outline of those conclusions might be of assistance and interest to the village. As a neutral observer, I must emphasise that it is for the village community and its representatives to*



*decide on the way forward and that I am, in offering these conclusions, in no way seeking to influence the outcome.*

*I was struck by the sincerity of the points made on both sides of the discussion and by the evidence of a significant level of support for the basic principle of retaining a village hall in Shutford. The differences of view appeared to focus on a) whether refurbishment of the existing hall is an option, b) the preferred location if a new hall is found to be essential, and c) the consequences for the precept of borrowing to fund the chosen solution.*

*Taking these points in turn, my conclusions were that:*

- *I was persuaded that the problems with the site and with the existing building are too serious for refurbishment to be a practical possibility and that rectification of damage to the foundations and stabilisation of the hill behind the hall would be difficult and much more costly if the existing hall is not first demolished. It seems clear that this work will need to be undertaken whether or not the existing building is replaced.*
- *It seems that the VHC have considered moving the hall to alternative sites, but have decided against this on the grounds that to do so would be more costly than remaining in situ. The indicative costings received by the VHC make provision for the restitution work. Moving to another site would require these restitution costs to be met on top of the rebuild element.*
- *Whether or not this second point is accepted, **all** of the alternatives discussed at the meeting would require substantial funding.*
- *Delaying building work pending a fundraising campaign would result in cost escalation that would be likely to put the target beyond reach and, importantly would extend the waiting period well beyond the realistic remaining life of the existing hall.*
- *The terms and early repayment flexibility of a PWLB loan strike me as very advantageous, whilst the impact on the precept seems*

*small in relation to the overall Council Tax liability of village households. It is my understanding that those on benefits are not required to pay the precept.*

- *It was very clear from the discussion that most of those present were unaware of the parlous state of the existing building or of the work done by the VHC in considering alternatives. I am in no doubt that much of the resistance to the VHC proposals expressed at the meeting could well have been assuaged had the VHC taken more time to communicate their reasoning before putting their proposals to a referendum.*

*Those are simply my personal conclusions, arrived at independently and without reference to any member of the Shutford community. It is naturally for the village and its representatives to decide whether or not to replace the existing village hall and, if so, in which location.*

*I am grateful to the VHC for inviting me to chair their meeting.*

**Michael Robarts**  
**Balscote**  
**7 February 2016**